By Muneeba Jaffar

Montrose or Bergview?

A look at what keeps travellers coming back

During the early festive season of 2025, local influencer Sed Pillay posed a simple question in a post that resonated more than expected: Are you a Montrose or Bergview person?

At a time when fuel margins are under pressure, convenience is non-negotiable, and forecourt retail is being reshaped by changing travel patterns and rising operating costs, Montrose and Bergview demonstrate how long-term strategic execution, rather than location alone, drives sustained relevance on a national highway.

For those of us who regularly travel the N3 between Durban and Johannesburg, this question needs very little context. These stops are not just refuelling points; they are landmarks. They are planned pauses in long journeys, familiar anchors on a demanding route, and in many ways, a litmus test for how well the industry understands the evolving needs of the long-distance traveller.

I'll take Sed's question one step further and ask: Which one are you – and why?

Between Harrismith and Van Reenen, there are several options to fuel up, stretch your legs, and grab a meal. Yet, despite the relatively short 25km distance between Montrose and Bergview, the two stand apart from the rest. They've earned an almost iconic status over decades of consistent delivery. What's interesting is how clearly these two have pulled ahead of the rest. It naturally leads one to consider what has enabled that gap, and what it would realistically take for other sites along this stretch to close it.

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Bergview – Engen 1-Stop

Quick service restaurants (QSRs): Bergview's offering is extensive and mostly national. Wimpy, Nando's, KFC, McDonald's Drive-Thru, Mugg & Bean, Seattle Coffee, Lighthouse Café, fishaways, Wrap It Up Café, Kauai and Panarottis (positioned alongside the motel) all feature. Add an antique shop and the Engen Quickshop, and you have a destination rather than a stop.

Bathrooms: Located in various areas across the property, they may feel dated in parts, but they are consistently clean, and that consistency matters more than aesthetics on a long road trip.

Parking: This is one of Bergview's strongest differentiators. Parking is ample, well-planned, and makes sense. Traffic flow is smooth and not intimidating, even during peak periods. The separate entrance and designated parking for buses is a detail that signals respect for the different customer segments.

Scenery: Mountains in the background and cows along the boundary fence, the views are breathtaking. The natural surroundings elevate and add to the overall experience of stopping there.

Atmosphere: Inviting and vibrant, without feeling overwhelming. The mix of food options, coffee and open space works well without feeling cluttered.

Engen Quickshop: The Brazmata Coffee Co. counter sits alongside a self-service coffee machine, an interesting dual offering. While I haven't observed customers using the machine despite its value proposition (two coffees for R40), the barista-served option is a winner. The store allocates a good amount of space to its kitchen and front facing Café 365. With so many QSRs around it, standing out isn't easy, but pies remain the hero.

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Shell Ultra City Montrose

Quick service restaurants (QSRs): Montrose offers KFC, Milky Lane, Debonairs Pizza, Steers, Fishaways and Mugg & Bean, complemented by a Protea Hotel on site. Inside the Shell Select is a vida e caffè, strategically positioned at the entrance.

Bathrooms: Also spread across the complex and clean, which is what regular travellers have come to expect from Montrose.

Parking: Ample and generally well-planned. Long-distance buses do have designated parking, though they share an entrance with the main parking area, which can feel congested at peak times.

Scenery: With the Wilge River nearby and mountains framing the site, Montrose is undeniably beautiful. Nature plays a strong supporting role here too.

Atmosphere: Welcoming and energetic. The selection of eateries and coffee options meets expectations well.

Shell Select: The vida e caffè at the entrance is a smart decision. Travellers wanting a quick barista-served coffee don't need to walk through the store. Inside, the range is solid and well executed. Fresh fruit packs are visible and appealing, packed pies are positioned both at entry and near the tills, and the bus schedule displayed nearby is practical and can support production planning and operational efficiency as well as speed up travellers waiting for their transport.

The aesthetics of a site makes a difference to the way that customers perceive the cleanliness and safety of the area.

Introducing fresh fruit is an unexpected addition to the national highway route.

Serves: 4
Preparation time: 20 minutes
Cooking time: 40 minutes

INGREDIENTS
8 Festive chicken thighs

Marinade
4 Tbsp (60ml) harissa paste
Salt and pepper
2 Tbsp (30ml) olive oil
2 lemons

Salad
250g couscous
2 large aubergines
Olive oil
1 tsp (5ml) cumin
1 tsp (5ml) coriander
1/2 tsp (2.5ml) cinnamon
1/2 tsp (2.5ml) ginger
1/4 tsp nutmeg
10g parsley, chopped
1 tub pomegranate kernels
1 Tbsp (15ml) olive oil
Salt and pepper

Herb yoghurt
1 cup (250ml) of plain yoghurt
10g parsley or dill, chopped
1 tsp (5ml) red-wine vinegar

Tasty & Delicious

Ideal for a family meal

HARISSA-SPICED THIGHS WITH COUSCOUS, SALAD AND HERB YOGHURT

Served with couscous, aubergine, pomegranate, parsley salad and herb yoghurt, these chicken thighs are a must-try.

Method:
Preheat the oven to 200°C. Place the harissa paste in a bowl and mix with 2 tablespoons of olive oil, salt and pepper. Add the chicken to the sauce and marinate in the fridge for 60 minutes.

Remove the chicken from the fridge and allow it to reach room temperature. Place the chicken on a baking tray and cook in the oven for 30-40 minutes, or until cooked through.

Cut the lemons in half and char them in a grill pan for serving.

Cook the couscous according to the packaging instructions. Loosen it with a fork and add a splash of olive oil, salt and pepper.

To make the salad, cut the aubergine into cubes. De-gorge the cubes by placing them in a colander over a bowl, then generously salt them to draw the moisture out of the aubergine – leave for about 15 minutes.

Make a spice mix by combining the cumin, coriander, cinnamon, ginger and nutmeg. Drizzle the olive oil over the aubergines and add the spice mix. Roast in the oven for about 20 minutes. Once cooked, set aside to cool.

Mix the couscous, aubergine, parsley, pomegranate kernels, olive oil, salt, and pepper in a bowl. Make a herb yoghurt by mixing the plain yoghurt, parsley (or dill) and red wine vinegar. Set aside to infuse in the fridge for about an hour before serving.

Serve the chicken with couscous, salad and herb yoghurt.

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Astral

Serves: 2
Preparation time: 15 minutes
Cooking time: 15 minutes

INGREDIENTS

For the stir-fry:

2 packs of instant noodles
2 Tbsp (30ml) cooking oil
1/2 cup (125ml) onions, diced
1/2 cup (125ml) red pepper, diced
1 cup (250ml) baby spinach
1/2 cup (125ml) cabbage, chopped

For the sauce:

1/2 cup (125ml) white or brown spirit vinegar
1/4 cup (60ml) water
2 Tbsp (30ml) crushed garlic
1 Tbsp (15ml) soy sauce
or Worcestershire sauce
1 Tbsp (15ml) cayenne pepper
or peri peri powder
4 tsp (20ml) cornflour
2 Tbsp (30ml) water

Tasty & Delicious

Ideal for a family meal

STIR-FRIED NOODLES WITH CHICKEN POPS

Quick and flavourful noodles tossed with veggies and crispy chicken pops for a budget-friendly meal in minutes.

Method:

For the stir fry: Cook noodles according to package instructions and set aside.

In a large pan, add cooking oil and saute onions, red pepper, baby spinach and cabbage together until the onions are translucent. Season with salt and pepper. Combine with cooked noodles, divide into separate bowls and set aside.

For the sauce: Add vinegar, water, sugar, garlic, soy sauce and cayenne pepper to a saucepan. Simmer for about 8-10 minutes while stirring in between to dissolve the sugar

Mix the cornflour with water and add this to the sauce whilst stirring to prevent it from sticking to the bottom of the pan.

Simmer the sauce for a few minutes until it reaches the desired consistency.

Cook frozen crumbed chicken pops according to package instructions and add to cooked noodles.

Gently toss the stir-fried noodles in the sauce and enjoy immediately.

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Astral

Reflections from the road

These two sites have earned their reputations over decades of investment, adaptation and consistency. Bergview, in particular, presents as more 'upmarket' in its overall execution. The traffic flow and parking expansion feel intentional and future-focused, including the placement of EV charger away from the forecourt. It signals a site thinking beyond today's requirements.

Montrose, by comparison, feels like it is due for a refresh, but I by no means believe that it's underperforming, especially as it's a major stop on the long-distance bus route. The forecourt appears dated, and the presence and number of taxis at the pumps can impact flow. The absence of a drive-thru is noticeable in an era where convenience increasingly defines choice. That said, Montrose holds its own in heritage and familiarity, and it houses one of the few remaining Milky Lanes, a brand that carries nostalgia and emotional connection for many South Africans.

Service matters deeply in these environments, and it's worth stating that the petrol attendants at Bergview Engen 1-Stop consistently deliver some of the best service levels I've experienced nationally.

From a retail perspective, both convenience stores face stiff competition from surrounding QSRs. I found the vida e caffè within the Shell Select to offer a stronger food proposition than the Quickshop's Café 365, while the Quickshop does provide a more affordable alternative to

Milk Lane and the other QSRs are positioned in a Food Court area next to the Shell Sellect, containing the majority of the eating places under one roof.

This self-serve medicine dispensing unit can work well in a site that does not have access to a national retailer's supply chain.

Non-traditional categories on a national highway, fit for purpose and relevant.

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QSR pricing. The inclusion of fresh fruit packs on a national highway is refreshing and aligns well with changing consumer expectations. Both stores have expanded into non-traditional ranges such as sunglasses, flip-flops and hats. Small details that show an understanding of traveller needs. The opportunity to cross-shop between QSRs and C-stores has the potential to go beyond CSDs and sunglasses. I'd welcome further competition between these stores.

Self-service coffee machines remain an interesting one for me. I understand why they're included, and in the right environment, they can work well. At Bergview, even though both options are available, I haven't noticed customers gravitating towards the machine on any of my visits. What does stand out though, is the team behind the Brazmata counter – they're fantastic, and sometimes that interaction is just as much a reason to stop as the coffee itself.

Safety at these stops is something that we're all conscious of, I didn't feel that I needed to look over my shoulder at either of them, but I did check that my vehicle was locked when I stepped out...

So, what would it take for others to catch up?

Quite simply: a lot – and that's not said lightly.

There are other fuel stops along this stretch, and they serve a purpose. But in truth, I'd only stop at them if I had no choice for example, if Montrose and Bergview were so overcrowded that parking was impossible. Some of these sites require revamps, but infrastructure alone won't close the gap. Service levels, consistency, and quality of offer remain difficult to match.

Perhaps the most significant differentiator is the presence of trusted national brands. This isn't about being a 'brand snob'; it's about confidence. National brands bring familiarity, predictability and a sense of safety for travellers who are tired, time-pressed, or travelling with families. That trust factor matters.

That said, there is absolutely space for strong regional and small businesses along this corridor, provided the quality is uncompromising and the experience is well executed. Travellers are willing to explore, but only when there is energy, a buzz, and a clear sense of pride in the offer. Oh yes, and clean working toilets.

Garage staples like the pies, sandwiches and muffins will always have a place on C-store shelves.

The lesson from Montrose and Bergview is clear: success is layered. It's not one tenant, one refurb, or one good season. It's decades of incremental improvement, operational discipline, respect for the customer, and an understanding that a fuel stop on a national highway is part of the journey.

And perhaps that's why the question still stands – Montrose or Bergview? When the basics are done exceptionally well, choice becomes a habit. **SR**

Muneeba Jaffar is the founder of MSI-J Consulting, driving forecourt convenience store growth and helping SMME vendors become retail ready. Backed by years of retail experience, she offers strategic insight and practical expertise. She can be contacted at muneeba@msi-jconsulting.co.za.

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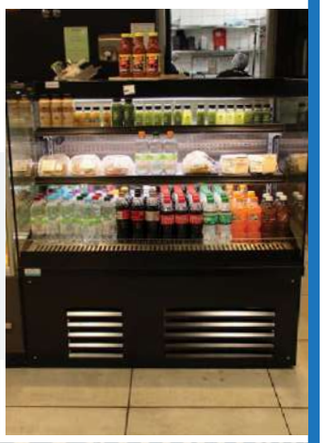


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